BUILDING AN ONLINE BRAND

In the online world, perception is reality. How others see you based on the information they find online is often who they believe you are, so your "image" or "brand" is their—and now your—reality.

That new reality also requires that you must now have an online presence. It's expected in our information-driven society. Even if you aren't of the mind to adopt online branding, others are already looking online to learn about and define you.

Your personal brand is what employers, professional colleagues, acquaintances, and your network see. Just as corporations carefully craft and manage their brands, so must you if you wish to grow your career in this digital and information age. Establishing your brand online enables you to differentiate yourself from your competition.

Beyond reputation management considerations, statistics show that 90 percent of recruiters and human resources professionals use Google, web searches, and social and professional networking sites to learn more about or make decisions on candidates. According to a *Business Week* survey, 35 percent of surveyed employers actually admitted to eliminating a candidate based on information gained online.

What types of things did they indicate they were looking for?

1. To see if the candidate presents himself or herself professionally
2. To see if the candidate is a good fit for the company culture
3. To learn more about the candidate's qualifications
4. To see if the candidate is well-rounded
5. To look for reasons to potentially not hire a candidate

Therefore, it's critically important to protect your brand and to control what you project online.

Review Your Brand

To see how others see you today, check your brand. As a first step, Google your name. What shows up in the first several pages of search results is often how your brand is currently portrayed online. Good or bad (or not at all), it is the reality of how you are seen by others.

Assess what your current brand is telling others about you already. Are you indexed? Can we find you? How are you associated? Is your online reputation positive? Is your brand healthy, up to date and relevant? Are you connected and networked? You have control of your brand and you must work to control its online presence. Take precautions to limit access to sensitive information, data, and visuals. Ensure that personal information can only be seen by those you decide should see it. Consider if what you show gives a potential employer or colleague reason to doubt the professionalism you wish to portray.

Define Your Brand

Now that you know how your brand is portrayed online, determine how you want it to be seen by others. Define yourself, your brand. What are your key attributes and characteristics? What are your areas of greatest knowledge and expertise? What sets you apart from others? What do you do exceptionally well? What are your strengths and core skill sets? What are your greatest achievements? You have unique value that sets you apart from all others. So tell your story.

Identify Key Online Market Segments

Familiarize yourself with social media—LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, blog, YouTube, etc. How do they work? What is their purpose? What do they do best? What can each one do for you? How will each online social channel specifically help you to achieve your goals and objectives?

Mastering the ability to market yourself online is one of the most important skills you need to develop. You need to use every available tool effectively and efficiently to set you apart from your competition. Companies want employees with digital skills, and one way to demonstrate your online savvy is to build an online brand.

The most commonly used site today for professional purposes is LinkedIn. Employers, recruiters, human resources managers, and others searching the web will be looking for you on this site. It's an excellent tool to create and project your brand in a clear, professional manner. Other professional branding tools to consider include a personal website for your portfolio, or a blog. You might want to write a thought-provoking, well-written blog focused on your core strengths and expertise. It's another great way to build your online brand package. Also consider commenting on others' blogs.

Develop Your Online Brand Profile

With LinkedIn, for example, you can develop a professional profile that defines your brand and add a resume that you can use to reach prospective employers. A personal blog can also contribute to your online profile. But since LinkedIn is currently most frequently used and viewed by recruiters, HR, and employers searching for candidates, it's especially important that you develop a very strong LinkedIn profile. This also tends to be the site that comes up on top in a Google search.

Your LinkedIn profile helps you and your your brand connect with others in your network, including prospective employers, so take extra time to develop it. Begin by writing a strong background summary. Use keywords and skills to help others to find you when they search. Highlight your knowledge, experience, expertise, achievements, and core skill set. Use a professional photo that reflects the image you want portrayed.

As you follow the LinkedIn template for creating your entire profile, you will discover it offers numerous ways for you to display your brand, from describing your skills and expertise to listing certifica-

tions, courses taken, honors and awards, and organizations you belong to and special projects you have worked on. It's also important to use your contact settings in such a way that others will know what you are interested in and are available for, such as new career opportunities, new business, consulting, special projects, etc.

Also, request recommendations from others as these serve as references and validate your professionalism.

Post and Manage Your Brand

Keep your online presence professional at all times; be meticulous and manage it professionally, too. Misuse of social media can and will work against you. Be careful about posting questionable photos, comments, and the like. Always assume others are closely watching you, including your present and future employers.

Be consistent in what you post, how it looks (including your photo) and the content you show. Be precise about what you post online and make sure all spelling, grammar, facts, figures, statistics, achievements, project lists, etc., are absolutely accurate and correct.

Also, take advantage of influencers; build a network of influential people—customers, clients, and experts in your niche. Connect with others in the network, including professional friends, colleagues, associates, and key business leaders. Generally, the more you network the greater the chances are for new opportunities to come your way. However, it's also important to note that the quality and not the quantity of your network is what will make the difference in advancing your career and your online presence. Build a strong online brand and then network, network, network.

Personal branding is an ongoing activity. It isn't complete just because you posted it once. You must continue to update it as your experience and skill set grow. Its ongoing development is similar to a product lifecycle, so creating, maintaining, and evolving your brand will help you enhance your online brand presence as well as project you positively and proactively with future employers and colleagues.

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